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Public libraries post-Hurricane Katrina: a pilot study

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to analyze the Hurricane Katrina-related narratives of Library and Information Science students at the University of Southern Mississippi's School of Library and Information Science, in order to gain insight into the role of public libraries post-Hurricane Katrina.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative NVivo software was used to code the narratives for themes related to public libraries post-Hurricane Katrina.

Findings – Post-disaster problems include physical damage or destruction of the libraries and inundation of the libraries by refugees and evacuees seeking communication and information. Post-disaster services provided by public librarians include providing communication and information, helping fill out aid forms, listening, offering comfort, volunteering, and donating.

Practical implications – This study can inform practitioners of the value of the public library as a quality of life issue since providing people with information and communication in public libraries played a crucial role in light of a catastrophic circumstance.

Originality/value – The unique context of local rural and small-town public libraries faced with devastating catastrophic circumstances can add to the body of literature related to the value of public library services post-disaster and form the basis for further, more comprehensive studies.

Keywords – Public libraries, Information services, Natural disasters, United States of America

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

According to the National Hurricane Center (National Weather Service, 2005), Hurricane Katrina, which hit the Gulf Coast in August 2005, was one of the most devastating natural disasters in US history. It was the costliest to hit the USA (estimated $81 billion) and one of the largest, with an estimated 1.2 million people under evacuation order. Katrina was the third deadliest hurricane with an estimated 1,500 deaths directly attributed to the storm.

The extraordinary destruction to Southern Mississippi documented by Scurfield (2008), Director of the Katrina Research Center, included:

- Extensive destruction across some 12 Mississippi Gulf Coast communities, from Pearlington and Waveland in Hancock County eastward to Gautier and Pascagoula in Jackson County.
- 68,700 homes and businesses were destroyed, 65,000 sustained major damage, and 60 percent of the forests in the coastal communities were destroyed along with much of the shipping and fishing industry.
- A 34 feet high storm-surge from Katrina in western Mississippi that was propelled inland *as far as 10 miles* from the coast through myriad rivers and bayous, severely damaging or destroying homes and communities that had never previously been flooded by storm surges.
- An estimated 350 buildings listed in the National Register of Historic Places were washed or blown away, along with most of the evidence of 300 years of Gulf Coast history, making Katrina *the worst historic preservation disaster* in our nation's history.

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- The two major east-west bridges on the Mississippi Gulf Coast that connect the three coastal counties together were totally destroyed.

Sharman Smith, Director of the Mississippi Library Commission, reported that 11 public libraries were heavily damaged or destroyed in coastal Mississippi. In addition, an estimated 50 percent of public library staff in coastal Mississippi counties lost their homes (Smith, 2006). According to the State Library of Louisiana (2007), Hurricane Katrina destroyed 15 libraries and damaged an additional 27 libraries in coastal Louisiana.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to document the post-disaster challenges faced by public libraries as well as post-disaster services provided by the libraries. Narratives of students enrolled in the University of Southern Mississippi's School of Library and Information Science, many of whom work in local libraries, were collected and analyzed in the fall 2005 and spring 2006 semesters.

Research questions

The research questions assessed how the public libraries performed their primary role of service for the information needs of people in local communities during Hurricane Katrina. Answers were sought to the following research questions:

- What post-disaster problems related to public libraries were noted in the students' narratives?
- What post-disaster public library services were noted in the narratives?

Assumption and limitations

It is assumed that the students' stories are accurate accounts of their post-disaster related experiences and perceptions.

This study is limited to post-Katrina narratives that were collected from students in four library and information science classes in fall 2005 and spring 2006 semesters (two classes of a core requirement course, library and information science (LIS) 605: Library Management; LIS 558: Internet Resources and Applications; and LIS 656: Online Public Services). This pilot study used a convenience sample rather than a random sample, so the results of the study are not generalizable but can serve as the basis for further study.

Definitions

- *Narrative* – "a story or account of events, experiences, or the like" (Dictionary.com, 2007).
- *Pilot study* – "a trial, both to examine the effectiveness of various aspects of the proposed research, such as procedures for data gathering, and to aid the completion of detailed project plans" (Research Mindedness, 2007).
- *Social value* – the social benefit of the public library and refers to various qualifiers such as "influence", "importance/usefulness", "quality", "principles", and "social/family values" (Pors, 2009).
- *Quality of life* – "... civic engagement, community organizations, public libraries, and aspects of arts and culture. Charitable giving, volunteering, and voting are widely used to reflect the strength of the connections residents have with their communities" (Morrison Institute for Public Policy, Arizona State

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University (2008). Issues of importance to the quality of life are public safety and crime, health care, and the economy.

Importance of the study

While the results of this pilot study are not generalizable, it is important to document the challenges faced by public libraries post-Hurricane Katrina as well as the immediate public library services offered. Analysis of the students' Katrina-related narratives adds to the body of research related to public librarianship and post-disaster recovery. This study can offer insight into the role of public libraries in serving their local communities.

The problem is significant because if the community needs are not correctly acknowledged, future support of public libraries may be affected. Research documentation of the social benefit of public libraries to their communities is needed. Documenting the challenges experienced by the LIS students as well as the post-disaster services their libraries offered can reflect the positive role that public libraries can provide in their communities and can be a basis for larger, more comprehensive studies related to public library services post-disaster.

Literature review

The role of public libraries

Public libraries provide a positive and distinctive public place and have served as major centers of community life, learning, and entertainment for more than a century. Today increasingly, they are even more important. According to Arizona Indicators (Morrison Institute for Public Policy, Arizona State University (2008)), "As many leaders and residents alike have perceived a decline in community ties, public libraries have been discovered once again as community builders. Arts and culture are important not just for learning and entertainment, but also for understanding a place's heritage and, in part, why it is the way it is" (Arizona Indicators, Morrison Institute for Public Policy, Arizona State University (2008)).

Public librarians serve diverse audiences and immerse themselves in the community in which they live and work. Public libraries are recognized as the best investment a community can make (Bundy, 2003).

Writing about public libraries in Denmark, Pors (2009) stated that library-professional literature offers many studies that clearly indicate that the public libraries have a very positive effect – economically and culturally – in the local communities which they serve. These include an increased quality of life, access to culture and art, free access to information resources, contribution to coherence in the local community, improved personal development and recreational activities, less social isolation, and a social space, education, public information, and business information. As far as commercial and economic effects, a better educated workforce results in an increased tax base and higher property prices (Pors, 2009).

Public libraries post-disaster

Case studies related to public libraries' responses to disasters by Dover and Simmons (1993) indicate some lessons learned. Public libraries and librarians:

- "Need to be made aware that the aftermath of a disaster is ongoing, with the effects lasting a very long time; requests for information and help may be received a long time after the event itself".

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- "Need rapid access to specialized information related to disasters – either their own core collection or a specialized back-up collection".

According to Dover and Simmons (1993), local communities and the public libraries they serve are not only greatly affected by a disaster's immediate impact but by a "pervading sense of disruption of normality." They list three stages of dealing with disasters:

(1) Departure from the old normality;

(2) Attempts to return to the previous normality; and

(3) Adaptation to a new normality.

Hurricane Katrina brought to light the reasons why public libraries are recognized as quality of life institutions. In a previous study of LIS students by Welsh and Higgins (2008), frequently cited problems post-Katrina included: lack of electric power, water, gasoline, information, and communication. Frequently cited emotional states included: worry, stress, fear, and feelings of being threatened and trapped. Frequently cited coping strategies related to resiliency included: making connections and exhibiting social skills through communication, giving and receiving help; reading; problem-solving and information skills; life skills, indicated by survival in catastrophic circumstances; taking care of others; and participation in recovery and relief efforts. Users looked to public libraries for information and communication.

In an article entitled "The role of information in disaster planning: a case study approach", Riley and Meadows (1995) explained how information flowed during and after three disasters in the UK: The Kegworth air crash, the Hillsborough Stadium football disaster, and the Towyn floods. The authored considered the problems various agencies involved encountered in acquiring and disseminating information and found that plans for information handling were appreciably revised in the light of experience gained.

While public libraries in Florida have helped citizens with hurricane and disaster preparation and response services and activities, no one has tried to identify best practices and guidelines that could help libraries with such work. A grant has recently been awarded to the Information Use Management and Policy Institute at Florida State University to help citizens with hurricane and disaster preparations, seeking to identify best practices and guidelines (Oder, 2008).

Methodology

The method employed in this study is naturalistic and advances the assumptions of qualitative designs. These are data that are unattainable from quantitative measures such as circulation figures and visitor statistics. Creswell (1994) cites Merriam's six characteristics of the qualitative mode of inquiry (1988):

(1) Qualitative researchers are concerned primarily with process, rather than outcomes or products.

(2) Qualitative researchers are interest in meaning – how people make sense of their lives, experiences, and their structures of the world.

(3) The qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.

(4) Qualitative research involves fieldwork where the researcher record behavior in its natural setting.

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(5) Qualitative research is descriptive in that the researcher is interested in process, meaning, and the understanding gained through words or pictures.

(6) The process of qualitative research is inductive in that the researcher builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, and theories from details (pp. 19-20).

Because the context of narrative impacts knowledge in a more personal way, those most likely to have authentic responses to the research questions were those directly affected by Hurricane Katrina. Again, these responses were held valid and reliable in the light of Fisher's (1987) narrative theory, that humans are rational beings and faithful to their own experience. In tandem with the assumptions of qualitative designs, Fisher's paradigm was used to collect data in a natural setting. Inductive reasoning was employed to build themes based on the research questions. Building on Fisher's narrative theory, it was assumed that student stories would "ring true with stories they know in their lives".

Narratives from 72 library and information science students relating their experience post-Hurricane Katrina were collected in fall 2005 and spring 2006 semesters. Students were self-selected in that they volunteered to relate their experiences. Their identities were held in confidence.

These narrative texts were analyzed and coded using NVivo7 qualitative software. Narrative passages related to public libraries were extracted and coded by library location and student. The compiled passages related to public libraries were analyzed for themes related to post-disaster challenges faced by the librarians as well as disaster-recovery services that were available for the immediate needs of the community.

Results

Of the 72 narratives examined, ten of them contained passages related to public libraries. The locations of the coastal libraries in the students' narratives that were affected by Hurricane Katrina included four in Alabama, one in Louisiana, and five in Mississippi.

1. What post-disaster problems related to public libraries were noted in the students' narratives?

The post-disaster problems faced by public libraries post-Katrina noted in the students' narratives include:

- Physical damage ranging from light damage to total destruction of local public libraries was documented in eight (80 percent) of students' narratives.
- Inundation by refugees, evacuees, and relief workers into public libraries that were open post-Katrina was mentioned in eight (80 percent) of the public library narratives.

In many cases, pubic library was the first place (and sometimes the only place) in a community to have electricity and operating computers. Several students mentioned that staffing the libraries was not a problem since personnel from libraries that were destroyed or damaged were able to assist with those libraries in their area that were open.

2. What post-disaster public library services were noted in the narratives?

The post-disaster public library services noted in the students' narratives include:

- Providing information, primarily via the use of computers but also by helping evacuees fill out Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Red

Cross aid forms, was noted by six students (60 percent). Several students mentioned specific information needs that were provided such as temporary library cards and computer access to reconnect with missing friends, relatives, or pets. Some who were not yet able to return home wanted help to locate aerial photographs of their neighborhoods and houses to assess the damage.

- Listening and providing comfort was mentioned by five students (50 percent).
- Volunteering and donating was noted by five students (50 percent) – three mentioned the generous donations of others and two mentioned their own donations of time, money, or materials.

Conclusion and recommendations

Analysis of the students' narratives indicates that while the effects of Katrina on public libraries were devastating, public libraries were at the same time inundated with patrons seeking information and a way to communicate with others. Services provided by the libraries include meeting the need for information and communication by providing aid organization information and forms and by providing access to computers. Additional services related to public librarianship including listening, volunteering, donating money or materials, and providing comfort and consolation.

Pors (2009) wrote that more documentation is needed to maintain and strengthen the idea that public libraries perform tasks and deliver services that are appreciated. That public libraries are economically responsible, cost-effective, and meet the targets set by the community is essential if the public library is to serve as an educational institution and sustain productive citizens.

Further, more comprehensive qualitative study is recommended to document the challenges faced by libraries affected by catastrophic disaster as well as the role of public libraries in providing post-disaster community services. Research on this topic can demonstrate the value of public libraries as community centers as well as help public libraries better serve their local communities, particularly during times of post-catastrophic disaster.

Selected narrative excerpts

Post-Katrina challenges and services related to public libraries

> The library I worked at was not as lucky as (I was). Of the four branches that were part of the library, two remain. The other two have been completely wiped out, not even the books were left behind. No one knows when the library will reopen or if they will be able to rebuild. Right now we are just waiting to see what will happen.

> From September 12 to 17, we had almost tripled the business in the reference department, where I spend most of my time. I cannot account for the tales of destruction and sorrow I have heard. I am not sure I will ever really want to. I can only be glad that no one I know was seriously hurt and that I can continue to go to work and help out however I can, even if it is hard sometimes.

> The week after Katrina, our library was inundated with evacuees from Louisiana (mostly) and some from Mississippi. For two solid weeks, we consoled families as they tried to fill out the frustrating FEMA forms online, tried to get Red Cross aid, coddle scared children, and grandparents, all while doing the normal feeding and living necessities. We understood how scared they were. . . . We bought snacks for the kids, water for the grownups and offered food and a shoulder to cry on as they navigated the horrendously busy FEMA Web site. Everyone in the library was stressed, yet we knew exactly what the evacuees needed: they needed to

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talk about their experiences, whether it was good or bad. We heard about losses and we heard about rescued pets.

... we dole out info to anyone who wants it. This is a part of the changing face of librarianship (I believe) and it's how I'm being taught to respond to information needs. Yes, I'm lucky. But think about it, we as librarians are the translators of information for those who are technologically challenged. We have to empower people with the information they need.... My director is ALSO making sure we are taking care of ourselves. She offered counseling services if we felt we needed it to help us to be able to let go and get some sleep without worrying about all the damaged lives we've encountered all day. One large reward for us is the smiles we get and the profuse thanks we get from our patrons. We remind them that it is a LIBRARY that has provided them with what they needed.

The library I work at received very little damage. Some ceiling tiles were down and rain blew in the book drop, so we lost those books. We were very fortunate because the library has about 4 or 5 big windows across the side that could have easily been blown out. Now the aftermath at the library has been completely crazy. Our computers that are available for public use have been extremely full since we re-opened. We have a sign-in list a mile long most of the day. It's a great feeling to know you can help someone in the least of ways.

(The) Library has been inundated with refugees... and inundated with a river of emotions. During afternoons of tearful drives home we have had to learn to accept the changes addition to our job descriptions: careful listeners and gentle reminders of hope: "it will take a long time to recover from your experiences and losses, but you'll do it!" We offered our expertise with FEMA paperwork and computers, and a lot of local information .... It has been said that only time can heal but with the frequent occurrences and strengthen hurricanes, I think we will be continually reminded of the loss of life, homes, and property and consequently, will be slow to heal.

The ... Branch was without air-conditioning, but was filled with ... evacuees from the (emergency shelter) next door ... who were willing to ignore the heat and humidity. We were trying to work as fast as we could to get evacuees on the library computers and to the FEMA sites. There were also many people trying to locate aerial photos online of their ... neighborhoods to see what became of their homes, as well as trying to locate missing family and friends.

The infrastructure of the city is strained to the breaking point, and traffic is the easiest way to observe this fact. But, despite all of the changes and hardships, I feel a sense of pride and accomplishment that so many people were helped by the library for which I work and its employees. This experience proves that forced, rapid changes are not necessarily destructive to a library, but can, on the other hand, prove very beneficial.

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